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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000125

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MINORITY MAYORAL CANDIDATE OPENS A DOOR

REF: ISTANBUL 118

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary. For the first time in 50 years, Turkey has an Armenian mayoral candidate. During a mid-March meeting, Democratic Left Party (DSP) candidate Yayla Karabet readily acknowledged that he was selected to appeal to the minority population on the Prince's Islands in the Sea of Marmara. His campaign appeals to the resident minority population as well as to the environmental concerns of the islanders. Karabet has a strong base among the Armenian community on the Islands, but is competing with a 10-year incumbent from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) party and a former district governor from the Republican People's Party (CHP). End Summary.

Minority Appeal

¶2. (C) Part of the first resurgence of minority municipal candidates since the 1950s, Democratic Left Party (DSP) mayoral candidate for the Princess Islands Yayla Karabet is very quick to acknowledge that he was chosen as an Armenian appeal to the minority population on the islands. It has been over 50 years since the last Turkish-Armenian held a mayoral seat, he said, and the "upswing" in the number of minority candidates and those holding appointed positions (five in Istanbul) is a relatively new phenomena. In 2004, Karabet ran as a candidate for candidacy for the left wing Social Democratic Peoples' Party (SHP) on the islands but was ultimately not selected as the candidate. While Karabet could not provide an explanation for this change, others, including lawyer Fethiye Cetin, suggest that it was spurred by the murder of Hrant Dink in 2007.

¶3. (SBU) Having grown up in the southeastern city of Malatya where his grandfather was a priest, Karabet moved to Istanbul for university in the 1960s. Like other Armenian families from that region during that decade, his family joined him. He estimated that only 12 or 13 Armenian families remain in Malatya and notes most emigrated from Turkey to Canada, while others converted. While growing up in Malatya, as well as during his studies in Istanbul and subsequent work as a doctor at the Austrian Hospital in Istanbul, he never self-identified as a minority or felt singled-out as such.

Unique Demographics

¶4. (C) Throughout his 25 years in politics, Karabet has worked with the Motherland Party (ANAP), CHP, SHP, and now DSP. Similar to Istanbul's Sisli municipality, which has an

Armenian deputy mayor (Ref A), the demographics of the islands are unique in Turkey. The majority of the 16,000 islanders are Armenian, Greek, Jewish, or Syriac. Karabet's campaign focuses on the preservation of the cultural mosaic and plurality of the islands which he perceives as being threatened. "Since the 1950s, the minority population on the islands has diminished due to pressure and threats from the religious Islamic movement and nationalists." He could not cite any specific examples of "threats" on the islands.

¶5. (SBU) In addition to cultural preservation, Karabet plans to promote health tourism, encourage more members of the cultural diaspora to return for tourism, discourage additional winter residents, and focus on waste water and solid waste management on the islands. He noted that the variety of fish in the Sea of Marmara has decreased from 120 to only four or five. He blamed the greater Istanbul municipality for allowing uncontrolled growth on the mainland which resulted in greater water pollution. Not surprisingly for such a small population, his campaign strategy relies largely on his personal relationship with the people of the islands. Karabet said he knows all of the islands' carriage drivers and has a personal relationship with everyone on the traditionally Armenian island of Kinali. Additionally, he ran a successful 3,000 signature campaign that prevented the installation of antennae on the islands in 2008.

Winning for Turkey

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¶6. (C) Karabet faces steep competition. He is challenging a popular AKP incumbent who has held the mayoral position for 10 years, while CHP is fielding a former district governor as its candidate. A Democratic Party (DP) Jewish candidate "doesn't have a chance" according to Karabet, but is not willing to join forces with Karabet. Karabet said he would also be open to working with the MHP mayoral candidate, but both other candidates have chosen to work independently.

¶7. (C) Comment: Karabet's candidacy reflects a recent pragmatic acknowledgement of the presence and electoral power of religious and ethnic minorities in areas of Istanbul. The fact that no minority candidates had been selected for decades in the liberal and minority-majority Islands demonstrates the marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities in Turkey. While Karabet himself acknowledges that he faces very stiff competition, his selection as a candidate is a foot in the door for minorities in Turkey and thereby a win in itself. End Comment.
Wiener